

Article

Review of Territory: On the Development of Landscape and City by ETH Studio Basel: Contemporary City Institute. With contributions by Roger Diener, Liisa Gunnarsson, Mathias Gunz, Vesna Jovanović, Marcel Meili, Christan Müller Inderbitzin, and Christian Schmid

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BOOK REVIEW

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Book details

ETH Studio Basel: Contemporary City Institute.

With contributions by Roger Diener, Liisa Gunnarsson, Mathias Gunz, Vesna Jovanović, Marcel Meili, Christan Müller Inderbitzin, and Christian Schmid.

Territory: On the Development of Landscape and City

Zürich: Park Books and University of Chicago Press; 2016.

228 pages, ISBN 978-3-03860-023-7

Review article

Territory: On the Development of Landscape and City (ETH Studio Basel: Contemporary City Institute 2016), edited by ETH Studio Basel under the guidance of architects Roger Diener and Marcel Meili explores the concept of territory through an analysis of how the non-urban hinterland of the city, its resources, structures, infrastructures, cultural and historical systems, is increasingly fundamental to the process of urbanisation and thus reverses the conventional city-centric view of examining how compact forms of the city dissipate into the wider city-territory. A reference point is Henri Lefebvre's thesis that put forward the "the complete

urbanization of society," (Lefebvre 2003[1970]) which read the urban spaces and typologies formerly beyond the traditional city core (such as agricultural and industrial zones, communication infrastructures, tourist enclaves), as now integral to the urban fabric as productive places and centres of activity. Indeed that notion helps frame *Territory* as an updating and testing of Lefebvre's thesis within an architectural framework and discussed in the first chapter of the book by Christian Schmid.

Territory consists of three chapters entitled "Terminology," "Places" and "Sections," which investigate how six territories characterised by different urban conditions are occupied, administered and given form. The first chapter, "Terminology," comprises two texts by Christian Schmid and Marcel Meili, which outline the keywords with which a redefined concept of territory can be understood, including: nature, water management, networks, infrastructure, agriculture, production, and settlements. Those categories are used to analyse the six territories and the development of the territorial spatial structure but have different implications for each territory thus revealing a degree of territorial specificity. The spatial structure is discussed in terms of networks, borders and differences: networks are the traces of society appropriating the territory, borders mark and are marked by the various powers

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that organise a territory, and differences come to light in the territory through juxtapositions of material and immaterial relationships.

The central chapter of *Territory*, “Places,” presents the readings of the six territories—the Nile Valley, Rome-Adriatic, Central Florida, the Red River Delta, Muscat and Oman, and Belo Horizonte. Each territory is understood as a paradigmatic case and discussed in a concise essay which describes how the landscape is divided, controlled and administered spatially and politically, and is illustrated with carefully selected photographs. In each case, further categories are elaborated to elucidate specific characteristics. For instance Christan Müller Inderbitzin discusses the “autonomous hinterland” between Rome and the Adriatic referring to the historically conditioned autonomy of regional centres rooted in Italian culture, which remains traceable today. Roger Diener speaks of “suspended urbanization” in Florida to describe the equivalence between a constantly extending settlement and landscape development, toward a critique of the notion of “complete urbanization” (with resonance of Lefebvre). Vesna Jovanović writes about the “even field” of the Red River Delta as a way to describe the division of the rice fields as the patterning of the territory.

The last chapter, “Sections,” comprises four essays on the following aspects: water management, agriculture, the role of industrial production and mining, and settlements. While the essays in the second chapter are specific to each territory, the essays in the concluding chapter develop common themes and cross-reference the prior analyses.

The book opens and closes with a suite of double page images. The opening photographs present each territory from the point of view of occupying the landscape. So the photograph of the Nile Valley shows two opposing edge conditions—the green fields and the ochre sands of the desert—divided by a road that cuts through the landscape with a watery horizon beyond, while the photograph of Vietnam’s Red River Delta shows people working the rice fields and the lines that define their edges. The book ends with a suite of satellite images in which the territorial structure can be read in, for instance, the multiple grids of Florida, the linear development of the Nile Valley or the archipelago of settlements in Belo Horizonte.

A constant reference point for ETH Studio Basel has been their *Switzerland: An Urban Portrait* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2006). The thesis of *An Urban Portrait* was to understand Switzerland as a fully urbanised country because of its spatial condition, geographic and cultural connection to major European cultures and Switzerland’s compact size. In that book Studio Basel identified various urban typologies—including: Alpine Resorts,

City Networks and Metropolitan Regions—and put forward the concepts of networks, borders and differences as a way to describe the urban character of Switzerland. The concepts and typological descriptions of that project, while specific to Switzerland, opened up questions about the nature of the urban territory, which ETH Studio Basel have since explored in numerous studies on cities and their territories including Nairobi, Belgrade and Hong Kong leading toward books such as *The Inevitable Specificity of Cities* (Basel: Lars Müller Publishers, 2015) and here in *Territory: On the Development of Landscape and City*. Each Studio Basel publication builds on the preceding one and so a dialogue across the research is developed. The material presented in *Territory* is in dialogue with that compiled in *The Inevitable Specificity of Cities*. For instance the study of the Nile Valley is present in different forms in both books, Schmid’s introduction to *Territory* extends his conclusion from *Specificity*, and the development of concepts extracted from *An Urban Portrait* extends with the present text.

Territory develops analytical strategies and a catalogue of concepts through which the interaction between power and space, hinterland and city, and the forms and processes of urbanisation of the city-territory, can be understood, defined and therefore critiqued and rethought. What the book does particularly well is to demonstrate that territory is a material and mental construction, keeping at a distance the language of “self-organisation,” “ecology” and “indeterminacy” as well as the imagery of statistics that often pervades texts that deal with the notion of territory. At the same time the book documents the territory through photo-essays which allude to a possible formal language. However, what the book lacks are maps, plans and drawings that would provide a more specific architectural knowledge. So while knowledge of the territory is narrated and given an image, and while the book itself is beautifully produced, it stops short of being an operative working tool for architects and urbanists who face the critical issue of the continuously extending urban territory.

Authors’ contributions

CM read the book under review and drafted the manuscript. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no competing interests.

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